

#identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation

Abigail De Kosnik and Keith Feldman (eds.)

University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2019, £29.50 pbk, (ISBN-10: 0472054155), 376pp.

Reviewed by: Nicola Bozzi, *University of Salford, UK*

No mainstream social media platform has been more associated with activism than Twitter. Once hailed as the platform of choice for the #OccupyWallStreet movement, however, in recent years Twitter's progressive image has been complicated by the emergence of fake news, vicious trolling campaigns, and far-right calls for "freedom of speech". Once again, the platform comes to materialise pressing socio-cultural conflicts, albeit in different and complex ways.

Among Twitter's intentionally limited affordances, hashtags have definitely captured the social imagination the most: not only have they become fundamental to establish networks, they are also the subject of comedy sketches and advertising campaigns. The current banality of the hashtag is, however, precisely the reason why we ought to consider this element more carefully. This is why *#identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality and Nation*, edited by Abigail De Kosnik and Keith Feldman, is a welcome contribution to social media scholarship.

While touching upon everyday aspects of hashtag use, *#identity* tackles this crucial element of web 2.0 in both material and cultural terms: a tag is not just a quick technical shortcut for online participation, it is an identity label that can acquire an embodied and cultural character. For De Kosnik and Feldman, Twitter is thus both empowering and potentially oppressive, as it allows specific identity groups to express themselves while exposing them to the antagonism of those who believe social difference is only a memory from a pre-Internet past. After all, as the editors point out in the introduction, "race, gender, sexual orientation and nationality are among the oldest and most persistent metadata, or 'tags', assigned to and organizing human relations" (p.12). In line with the work of new media scholars like Lisa Nakamura (2002) and Wendy Chun (2009), but also André Brock's (2012) more recent accounts of Black Twitter, *#identity* is thus necessary precisely because it highlights how hashtags do not only embody the technical promise of participation, but persistent cultural specificity as well.

The collection is organised in four sections.

"Black Twitter Futures" highlights how African-American culture permeates Twitter culture at large: these essays focus on hashtags that establish networks for solidarity (#youOKsis), memorialise victims of police brutality (#SandraBland), or contribute to the imagination of new futures (#AfroFuturism). The section also touches upon issues of digital labour through Malika Imhotep's discussion of #onfleek, an expression originated by Vine user Peaches Monroe that wound up being appropriated in a variety of contexts, including advertising campaigns. "Mediated Intersections" focuses on how Twitter interacts not only with other forms of media, like TV shows or viral YouTube videos, but intersectional identities as well. The most relevant chapter in terms of *#identity* is Lyndsey Ogle's account of a series of hashtags relating to postfeminist discourse (#YesAllWomen, #WomenAgainstFeminism, #ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism), which together demonstrate the complex interactions between the online performance of a gendered identity, feminism as a political endeavour, and neoliberal self-branding. "Disavowals" delves deeper into specific conflicts happening around or through hashtags. A prime example is the case of #AllLivesMatter, whose colour-blind universalism, according to Kyle Booten, winds up conflicting with the specificity and urgency of #BlackLivesMatter. Of interest is also Bonnie Ruberg's exploration of #NoHomo, which - rather than a downright negation of homosexuality - exemplifies a more complex self-policing of straight masculinity. Finally, "Twitter International" offers perspectives from India, Africa, and the UK (the latter through the experience of the BLMUK

movement). While the platform seems to be useful to establish activist coalitions and support the enactment of a pan-African identity, the Indian case (discussed by Neha Kumar) demonstrates in particular what is perhaps the main limit of the book: Twitter and hashtags have the most currency within an American or Western imaginary, while other contexts associate the platform mostly with celebrity-fan interaction.

The US-centric focus of the collection is also due to its geographic specificity: the book is in fact the first publishing endeavour of The Color of New Media, a Berkley-based working group that focuses on the perspectives of minoritarian users and makers of digital culture. The group's contingency is explored throughout three chapters based on long conversations about three landmark events - the Ferguson unrest, the election of Trump, and Berkley's own controversial Free Speech Week. Rather than a mere appendix, the conversations provide an important counterpoint to the essays, offering a precious situated account of what it means to do critical media research within an institutional and political context where real-life, conservative trolls like Milo Yiannopoulos are invited to speak on the same grounds on which, in the 1960s, the Free Speech Movement was staging acts of civil disobedience for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam.

Overall, then, *#identity* is worth reading because it does not only remind us that studying hashtags is interesting, but it demonstrates why it is important.

References

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